

THE RUINED TEMPLES OF KAMAKURA

II

NICHIREN AND KAMAKURA

THE name of Nichiren is closely associated with the history of Kamakura. There are several Nichiren temples here which are interesting for the historical glimpses they give of the great Buddhist or his followers.

Nichiren, the founder of the Nichiren sect of Japanese Buddhism, was the son of a fisherman and stands out in Japanese Buddhist history as a self-made man. He was born in the province of Awa in the year 1222. Most remarkable incidents are recorded relating to his birth and childhood. Certainly the child showed great intelligence and character at an early age; for when he was eleven years old, he became a student at a Shingon temple, and a fully ordained monk, under the name of Rencho, at the age of sixteen (or eighteen according to some). He was filled with the earnest desire to be a wise man, and from the time he was quite young he prayed to the Bodhisattva Kokūzo (Ākāśagarbha) for great wisdom.

The boy-priest came to Kamakura and studied there for four years. Later he returned again and met the priest Sonkai, whom he accompanied to Hiesan, the holy mountain near Kyoto, where he studied, for eleven years, not only the doctrines of Dengyo Daishi but also the doctrines of all the other sects.

It was at the age of thirty-one near his home temple, in a solitary spot in the mountains, that he went through with the spiritual experience which revealed to him that the Hokke, or teaching of the *Saddharma-Pundarika-Sutra* was the true one, and that he was the revelator of this true Buddhist teaching; and when he first uttered the mystic words of *Namu-Myōhō-Renge-Kyō* which became the basis of all his teaching

and then a long flight of stone steps ascending to the Niomon (i.e., gate guarded by the *Dvārapālas*). High, noble cryptomeria trees border the steps and the surrounding parts and give a secluded and even solemn effect as if one had suddenly entered a remote forest. As one completes the ascent of the mossy steps, he comes out upon a plateau or terrace where there are flowering trees, a number of tombstones and at the end the Hondo, which was hardly touched by the earthquake; but other buildings in the temple enclosure are more or less in ruins. This temple of Myōhonji is closely associated with the tragedy of the Hiki family in the thirteenth century. Most of the temple was built by Daigaku Saburo, who was a convert of Nichiren, and the temple was named by Nichiren himself in honour of Daigaku's mother. Hiki Yoshikazu's grandson, little Ichiman, a child of three years, was burned to death at the time of the extermination of the Hiki family, and the sleeve of his dress, the only thing to be found after the burning of his house, was preserved and buried in the precincts of Myōhonji, and a tombstone erected over it. The mother of the baby Ichiman drowned herself in the pond of Myōhonji in grief and despair, and her spirit is said to have assumed the form of a dragon which caused much trouble to people. Nichiren himself, by the side of the pond, recited the sacred scriptures and prayed for the unhappy soul with the result that the soul was set free and came to Nichiren in a dream, expressing joy and gratitude for her liberation. Certainly no unhappy spirit now seems to be hovering over the domain of Myōhonji; rather do peace and quietude hold sway in this secluded spot.

Near Myōhonji is Hongakuji, popularly called Nicchōji from Niccho, the pupil of Nisshutsu who was Nichiren's disciple. Prayers are offered here for the healing of eye diseases. In the graveyard is to be seen a monument to the famous sword-maker of feudal times, Masamune. Not far away, is one of Nichiren's preaching sites and also near the

priests and followers of other sects. He was also disliked on account of his prophesies of further calamities. He was hated, stoned, and beaten, but it all had no effect upon the intrepid reformer.

In 1260, he presented to the Regent Hōjō Tokiyori, his celebrated discourse, *Rissho Ankoku Ron*, in which he prophesied that unless the government and the people would turn to the truth of the *Hokke Kyo* (Hokke sutra), the country would meet with foreign invasions and calamities. This was received with so much anger by both priests and officials that Nichiren was persecuted for his temerity. His hut was set fire to, but he himself escaped. Later on he was captured and banished.

During his exile of two years when he was befriended by a fisherman, he wrote much, and as soon as he was released, he returned to Kamakura and made many trips in neighbouring provinces preaching the Hokke.

Now comes the most thrilling incident of his dramatic career. In 1271, he was arrested again in Kamakura and sentenced to be executed at Katase, near Kamakura. When everything was ready for the execution, Nichiren knelt awaiting the fatal sword stroke when suddenly the sky was alight, thunder crashed, and a ball of fire lit the executioner's sword, which broke into two pieces and the executioner himself fell to the ground. This so terrified everyone that it halted the execution. In the meantime, however, the Regent had changed his mind, having been warned in a dream, it is said, and he sent a messenger with a reprieve. The result was that Nichiren was sentenced to banishment instead of to death and was sent to the island of Sado in the north. For three years, he lived in that snowy land, in a miserable little hut, suffering the greatest hardships from exposure and insufficient nourishment and subject to attacks from his enemies. In spite of this harsh life, he succeeded in making converts.

Upon Nichiren's return to Kamakura, he made another

prophesy which fortunately for him was fulfilled. This was in regard to the invading attack of the Mongolian fleet which actually took place as he had prophesied. It was a great triumph for Nichiren and the turning point of his career. The whole world changed toward him. His followers increased by thousands and the Regent granted him full liberty and offered him a temple in Kamakura. He refused this however and preferred to withdraw to the solitary mountain of Minobu, where in extreme simplicity he lived with some chosen and devoted disciples, studying, writing, and teaching.

Nichiren died at Ikegami near Tokyo on October 13, 1282, instructing his followers up to the very end and with his last breath reciting the holy formula, *Namu-Myōhō-Renge-Kyo*.

Nichiren's character and personality is two-sided. To his enemies he appears as a noisy charlatan, creating enemies when there was no need for it, and his followers have sometimes over-emphasised this militant and destructive side of their founder. The times in which Nichiren lived forced him to be aggressive in order to gain a hearing for his new gospel. Whatever drawbacks and defects there may have been to him and to his methods, he stands out in Buddhist history as a fearless, independent, and original character, thoroughly sincere, honest and brave. His own opinion of himself was that he was the Buddha's special messenger. He once said, "I am a worthless, ordinary priest, but as promulgator of the *Pundarika Sutra*, I am Śakyamuni's special messenger, and as such Brahma serves me on my right hand and Sakra on my left, the Sun guides me and the Moon follows me, and all the deities of the land bend their heads and honour me."

As a good part of Nichiren's life was spent in Kamakura, we find here many remembrances of the Buddhist saint.

Myōhonji is the largest of the temples belonging to the Nichiren sect. It is most beautifully and picturesquely situated in the western part of the town. There is a long approach

and practice, the Nichiren sect was really born.

The Saddharma-pundarika-Sutra is believed by Chinese and Japanese Buddhist scholars to be the last teaching given by the Buddha Śākyamuni. But it was through Nichiren that the Sutra came to be identified with Buddhism itself in popular mind. The main principles of the Hokke sect as established by him is based upon the doctrine of the Eternal Buddha, which is expounded in the *Pundarika*, chiefly in the sixteenth chapter on Eternal Life. According to this, Śākyamuni who appeared more than two thousand years ago in India and passed away into Nirvana, was merely one of the manifestations of the Buddha Eternal, who is never subject to the law of birth and death but is ever working out his original plan to lead all sentient beings to Enlightenment. The object of the religious life is therefore to realise the fact that we are, though finite and imperfect, living in the enlightenment of the Eternal Buddha himself. To attain this object, we take refuge in the *Saddharma-pundarika* and devote ourselves with singleness of thought to the invocation of the title of the Sutra, which will open up our hearts finally to the inner signification of the holy teaching itself contained therein.

From this time on, Nichiren became a reformer, but from the first day that he announced his mission, he was assailed with doubt and derision, and he fled to Kamakura where he lived for some time, preaching by day and studying at night.

It was a time of storm and stress at that period, in Kamakura, calamities of all kind succeeding one another,—earthquake, tempests, and even famine, and disease claiming each scores of victims. Nichiren believed that these troubles were due to the evil lives of the people and especially of the superstitious and untrue beliefs of the religious world and its neglect of the Hokke. He went out into the highways and byways preaching vigorously against the Buddhist sects and the lives of their adherents. He made many converts among all classes of people and thereby incurred the enmity of the

old temple of Myōryūji, the place of the practising of Nisshin's austerities. Nisshin was a follower of Nichiren and given to self-torture. It is related of him that for ten successive days, he plucked out a nail from his fingers, praying that new nails might grow as a sign of Heaven's favour and with the blood he painted a mandala representing Gokuraku (Heaven or Paradise).

Ryukoji at Katase near Kamakura is an interesting place. It was erected by the disciples of Nichiren to commemorate his miraculous deliverance from the sword of the executioner, thirty-four years after the event itself. Just within the temple precincts is the site of the execution ground and here a memorial stone is placed. Now, all is quiet, and the doves blue, grey, and white circle and flutter over the temple roofs.

Ten years ago or more, I visited Ryukoji, when it was in splendid repair. Now, alas! the earthquake has laid its marring hand upon it, and although several buildings have been spared, the general effect is of dilapidation,—memorial stones broken and upset and many shrines and other edifices demolished. The main temple, however, reached by a flight of steps, is intact. The outside is brightly ornamented with dragons, birds, and flowers. The altar inside is gaily decorated with lanterns, banners, and flowers. Before the altar are lacquer stands on which repose the holy sutras. Nichiren himself is enshrined here.

When I entered the temple, I went at once to the little booth at the right, where charms and sacred talismans and pictures are sold. I bought two fine black and white representations of Nichiren, and while examining them, a man with a small child entered. He was attired in the robe of a fisherman, a bright, blue cotton-cloth dress, ornamented in red, displaying birds and waves. He paid some money in order to hear the sacred sutra recited before the shrine of Nichiren. At other times, the curtain before the shrine is kept down.

Now, the bell rang, the fisherman-devotee dropped to his knees, the chanting began, and slowly the curtain began to rise until the seated statue was exposed to view. I bought a candle which I placed before the altar of the saint. As I did so, I found the fisherman friend repeating "Namu-Myōhō-Renge-Kyo" (pronounced Namu-Myō-Hōren-Gekyo), and I was touched by his simple piety.

Up above this temple, by flights of stone steps a terrace is reached, but here all is dilapidation; the Shichimendo* is in ruins. But from this spot the splendid view of the ocean, the town of Katase and the isle of Enoshima are as beautiful as ever. There is also a pagoda at Ryukōji, five-storied, containing a statue of Nichiren. It is of recent origin, having been erected fifteen years ago by devotees of this sect, and was uninjured by the earthquake. There is also a cave, containing Nichiren's statue. When Nichiren is carved in statues, he is very often represented standing clad in a long robe with his hands folded together in the attitude of prayer, his large, broad face depicting both serenity and firmness.

There are three other well-known Nichiren temples in Kamakura. One of them, Ankokuji, is said to be the site of the hut where Nichiren lived during the period of his persecu-

* This is a shrine dedicated to the goddess known as Shichimen Tennyō, who is the special guardian of the Nichiren temple. While Nichiren was preaching at Minobu one day, a refined, noble-looking lady was found among the audience. Nobody knew where she came from. One of Nichiren's lay-disciples conceived the idea of tracing her, being somewhat suspicious of her personality. Nichiren read his mind and told the lady to show her original form, whereupon she was transformed into a huge serpent more than ten feet long. The entire assembly got frightened. Changing herself again into the human form, she made this declaration, that Nichiren was a special messenger sent by the Buddha to preach the gospel of regeneration to the people of the present era, that she was also despatched by him to be the guardian goddess of the saint, and that she would protect the Nichiren temple from fire, war, and other disasters. Since then a shrine dedicated to her is often found at a Nichiren temple.

tion and where he wrote the *Ankoku Ron*. There is a pretty story connected with him in which a monkey takes part. It is told that when Nichiren was in great danger from his assailants, a white monkey came and taking him by the long sleeve of his dress, guided him to safety. This safe place was the cave back of Ankokuji, and now inside it is a statue of Nichiren, and sitting beside him, holding his sleeve, is the faithful white monkey.

This temple was built during Nichiren's lifetime and it has survived the earthquake fairly well. The Hondo contains a huge head of the Buddha made by a priest who aspired to make a colossal statue but did not live to finish it, and only the great head remains as a remembrance of his zeal.

Near Ankokuji is Myōhoji. After Nichiren's first exile and his return to Kamakura, he came here to live and remained until he left Kamakura for the last time for Minobu, when he gave over the temple to the care of his disciple Nichiro. The interior is ornamented with paintings and is gay and bright. On the altar are figures of the gods and saints, the centre one being of Nichiren himself. This temple was rebuilt in 1357 by Nichiyei, son of the unfortunate Prince Morinaga, who was imprisoned in a cave in Kamakura and later killed. Nichiyei was a Nichiren priest and here he built a memorial to his martyred father where he daily offered incense and prayers to his father's spirit. The surroundings of the temple are beautiful and secluded and were a favourite retreat of Nichiren during his stay in the cave of Ankokuji.

Chōshōji originally a branch of Myōhōji, is another temple in Kamakura, associated not with Nichiren himself but with two of his disciples, Nichisai and Nichiyū. It is picturesquely situated and boasts of an ancient maple tree said to have been tended by Nichiren himself when it was a potted dwarf tree, later on brought here and planted and still to this day in a flourishing condition. Near the gate is a spring of very pure

water called the Nichirensui or spring of Nichiren, and the tradition has it that the saint performed many miracles here.

Every spot in Kamakura seems to record the memory of some historical person or event. Many romantic stories are told of the old life. Kamakura was the home of the Shōguns and their court, of nobles and soldiers, of churchmen and prelates, and also of common fishermen and farmers. Of all these, none stands out more prominently and represented with more vigour and vitality than the personality and character of the great Buddhist Saint, Nichiren, who carried high the banner of the sacred *Pundarika* and emblazoned upon Buddhist history, the holy phrase, “*Namu Myōhō Renge Kyo.*”

BEATRICE LANE SUZUKI